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Navajo Nation's window to its world

The Navajo-run Thunderbird Lodge in Arizona is one of a series of enterprises across North America offering tourists an insight into Native American heritage. On the road through the tree-studded high desert toward the small town of Chinle, Arizona, the car radio was picking up the local Navajo station, with a playlist heavy in Top 40 hits, peppered with Navajo-language station breaks and car commercials.

The sky was a cloudless blue, and I was on my way, with my childhood friend Esther, to Canyon de Chelly, a geologic maze of towering red cliffs and deep-cut gorges dotted with pictographs and the ruins of ancient cliffside villages. Lying in the heart of the 21st-century Navajo Nation, a semi-autonomous region straddling parts of Arizona, Utah and New Mexico, it is one of the oldest continuously inhabited places in North America, a window into both an ancient world and a modern one.

It was late afternoon when we reached the mouth of the canyon. As we stood at the visitors' entrance, dazzled by the 360-degree horizon beckoning from every direction, Merlin Yazzie, a cherub-faced park ranger with a ponytail, gave us a friendly wave. 'Is this your first visit to the area?' he said. 'Welcome to Navajoland.' The stereotypes of glitzy casinos and a kitschy cowboys-and-Indians past have long dominated popular notions about visiting Native American lands. Even where the more genuine attractions are obvious, as at the majestic Monument Valley straddling Arizona and Utah, it has often been difficult for outsiders to find an accessible and comfortable way into the nuanced realities of Indian country: its venerable history and distinct cultures; its remote, rugged natural beauty.

It was an emerging change in this old pattern that had brought us to Canyon de Chelly (pronounced 'de Shay'). A new generation of Indian entrepreneurs and leaders are making their influence felt in tourism, bringing a sensitive, updated sensibility to hospitality, along with a renewed emphasis on authenticity. In some of the most gorgeous, intriguing and remote places of Native American territory, the focus is shifting toward a more modern and higher-end travel experience.

We stayed three days at Canyon de Chelly, at the Thunderbird Lodge, a historic trading post renovated into a modern hotel run by an all-Navajo staff, which also offered tours led by knowledgeable Navajo guides. Our room was one of 73, all with wi-fi internet and all simply but tastefully decorated, with prints and paintings by Navajo artists on the walls, and curtains and bedcovers patterned in tribal motifs.

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About 240km away, a hotel has appeared for the first time in the Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park. Aptly named The View, it is owned by a local Navajo family and designed with meticulous care to blend into and capitalise on the splendour of the landscape.

Rust-coloured and avowedly eco-sensitive, it frames the iconic Mitten and Merrick Buttes with its balconies, and it is furnished with a carefully curated collection of rugs, pottery and jewellery by Native American artisans. Its chef, MacNeal Crank, aged just 33, reinterprets Navajo recipes he learned from his grandmother, with the help of training at the Cooking and Hospitality Institute of Chicago's Le Cordon Bleu programme.

In New Mexico, a new cultural centre and restaurant serving Native American and New Mexican cuisine has opened at the foot of Acoma Pueblo, or Sky City, a traditional community perched high on a mesa. The centre also offers tours of the pueblo. Elsewhere, Indian tour companies have sprung up to guide travellers through off-reservation sites that offer insight into Indian life and the Native American past.

And in Canada, the new tribal tourism is showing itself in Wendake territory just north of Quebec, where the strikingly modern Hotel-Museum has been constructed of glass and wood to emphasise the Huron Wendat tribe's concept of 'absence of limit' the connection between humans and the natural world. Its 55 rooms and interpretive biking trails lie along the banks of the Akiawenrahk (also known as the St-Charles) River.

In all of these instances, environmental consciousness and a respect for heritage have been blended harmoniously with 21st-century sophistication. The trend reflects not just the new ideas and marketing savvy of Indian entrepreneurs, but also a new pool of customers eager to engage with the Native American world. 'People are a little more open-minded these days when it comes to visiting Native America,' said Sarah Chapman, international co-ordinator for Go Native America, a Montana-based tour company featuring indigenous guides and interpreters. 'On the one hand, you have that flashy eco-building endeavour going that's very much the case with younger people in tribal tourism but I think the other new thing going on here is that people want to connect more.' Go Native America was founded 15 years ago by Chapman's husband, Serle, a writer and photographer of Cheyenne and other tribal heritage. One of its trips, called 'Yellowstone Is Indian Country', visits ancestral sites and explains the traditional 'origin stories' set in Yellowstone National Park.

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Of course, sites like Canyon de Chelly and Monument Valley have long been familiar icons. Monument Valley served as the backdrop for many of John Ford and John Wayne's westerns. (Chapman says she usually spends about five minutes apprising each new group of tourists of 'John Wayne's irrelevance to Native American history'.) And one of photographer Ansel Adams's most spellbinding images of the American south-west is his 1940s-era photograph of the White House ruin, built in Canyon de Chelly by 13th-century Anasazi farmers.

The canyon actually a system of interconnected canyons was established as Canyon de Chelly National Monument in 1931 and is officially part of the national park system, even though it is not on federal property. Encompassing 34,000 hectares (131 square miles, roughly the size of Philadelphia) of Navajo tribal trust land, it is home to a living community of some 80 Indian families and is managed jointly by the National Park Service and the Navajo Nation. Yazzie, the ranger, told us that the visitor centre gets only about 300 or 400 visitors a day 'a drop in the bucket compared with the Grand Canyon'. No tour buses caravan through Canyon de Chelly. Except for one trail, visitors are allowed to enter the canyon backcountry only in the company of a Navajo guide.

Besides Thunderbird Lodge, the only other option for staying within the park is a campsite adjacent to the inn, though some guided overnight trips to the canyon floor also allow you to pitch a tent. But the appealing comfort of a well-maintained hotel and restaurant makes a longer, more meaningful stay in this remote region accessible to more visitors. And it is well worth the stay to experience a deeper interpretation of the place.

Thunderbird offers daily group tours of the canyons in rugged four-wheel-drive vehicles, but Esther and I chose to explore on horseback with the help of Cedric Aragon, 28-year-old co-owner of Totsonii Ranch, which is reached by a dirt road off the South Rim Drive. The relaxed rhythm of horse-riding made it easy to talk and exchange cultural anecdotes, and with Aragon, the access we had to the ruins and prehistoric sites was immediate and stunning.

With the horses balancing nimbly on narrow cliff trails, we picked our way down 350 metres to the canyon floor. Through cottonwoods and silvery stands of Russian olive trees, the vertiginous views of sky and rock were mesmerizing.

At the base of Spider Rock, a sheer-walled 250m sandstone pinnacle that shoots up out of Canyon de Chelly near its intersection with Bat and Monument Canyons, Aragon motioned to a shallow cave just behind us. There on the wall above our

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heads was a series of cave paintings, white pictographs probably made sometime between 1AD and 1300AD by the Anasazi, the ancient predecessors of the Hopi and other Pueblo people.

Mingled among these paintings were darker ash drawings of horses running across the red sandstone, done more recently by the Navajo, who entered Canyon de Chelly some 300 years ago. First introduced to horses by the Spanish, the Navajo had soon become skilled riders and herders themselves. A rock overhang was marked with black Xs, signifying the stars in the sky.

After peering up at the drawings, the three of us climbed down to a nearby rock, where I soon found myself in a shouting match with Aragon. 'Hooooee!' he bellowed. A hundred other Aragons, planted at various locations around the 30km-long canyon branch, shouted back. The real one sat back, pleased, on a red sandstone boulder, and said, 'Now you.' I took a deep breath before letting loose with a holler. My alter egos answered back promptly, if a bit anaemically. 'They might be able to hear you over at the next overlook, but they'd never be able to find you,' Aragon said. 'That's the beauty of these canyons they protected our people for a long time.' I stared up at the rust-colored spires juxtaposed against a brilliantly blue sky. We were the only people for miles.

Making the canyons yell back was tradition for Aragon, whose family land is near the lip of the canyon that overlooks Spider Rock. Given the fact that people have been living there continuously for about 4,000 years, it seemed right to call on them. Their spirits were still around, he told us, not to mention the physical evidence of their lives.

Hundreds of metres up, the superbly preserved ruins of multi-storey villages and ceremonial sites were tucked away on rock ledges and alcoves that appeared all but impossible to get to. The ancients, it seems, were pretty amazing climbers.

When we had entered the park the previous day, we had stopped to look at the example there of a hogan, the traditional Navajo home, built with logs and mud. Yazzie had explained the traditional design: a whorled pattern of logs on the roof representing the heavens, crossed logs by the doorway to resemble a mother's folded hands, the doorway to the east to greet the rising sun.

Now, as we travelled across the landscape on horseback, we saw many a modern hogan, some built with plywood or aluminum. Aragon pointed out wooden sweat lodges (a sort of ceremonial sauna), and explained the uses of desert plants and

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trees, from yucca to pine and sagebrush, for food, medicine, herbs and dyes.

Aragon also told us about his grandfathers, Navajo code-talkers during the second world war, who provided encoded information for US Marine Corps units using Navajo words. I asked whether he preferred to be called Navajo or Din. 'I'm very proud to be Din,' he said thoughtfully. 'That's what we call ourselves it means 'the people.' ' In getting to know these people, in listening to their stories of local life, exploring the ancient canyonlands and relaxing in our comfortable room, we found our expectations for a new kind of travel well met. 'We would welcome anyone who came here with a good heart and honest interest,' Aragon told us. 'I like to be a part of people's memories.' Bonnie Tsui is the author of 'American Chinatown: A People's History of Five Neighborhoods' (Free Press). Canyon de Chelly National Monument (00 1 928 674 5500; nps.gov/cach; no park fee; donations accepted) is about four hours north-west of Albuquerque. The North and South Rim Drives are self-guided and open all year, as is the White House Trail. Thunderbird Lodge (00 1 928 674 5841; tbirdlodge.com) has doubles from \$105. The cafeteria-style restaurant is in an 1896 trading post and at every meal a traditional dish, such as chili verde, is offered. Off South Rim Drive, Totsonii Ranch (00 1 928 755 2037) offers horseback tours of the canyon at \$15 a person for an hour, plus \$15 for the guide. Stalls in the car park opposite the Best Western in Chinle sell roasted hominy, Navajo burgers, blue corn stew and roast mutton fry-bread sandwiches with crackle-skinned green chili (\$6.50).

The 90-room View Hotel (00 1 435 727 5555; monumentvalleyview.com; doubles from \$195), four miles east of Highway 163 in Monument Valley, was built to eco-friendly specifications. A local Navajo high school grows vegetables and herbs for the restaurant. A few hours west in Tuba City, the Explore Navajo Interactive Museum (explorenavajo.com; general admission \$9) explains Navajo traditions with murals, film, maps and cultural displays.

In New Mexico, the Sky City Cultural Center and Haak'u Museum on the Acoma Pueblo (sccc.acomaskycity.org) is about an hour west of Albuquerque. Visitors can tour the pueblo, which sits atop a 111m-high sandstone mesa. At its Yaak'a Cafe, traditional Acoma dishes include blue corn pancakes. Hotel Santa Fe (1501 Paseo de Peralta; 800-825-9876; hotelsantafe.com; rooms from \$158) is the only Native American-owned hotel in the area. Its spa treatments include Indian healing rituals, and the Amaya restaurant serves modern American Indian cuisine.

In Canada, the Hotel-Muse Premires Nations (00 1 866 551 9222; hotelpremieresnations.com) north of Quebec has rooms from C\$156 (90). The on-site

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museum is free to hotel guests, and a high-end restaurant serves First Nations-inspired dishes. Nearby attractions include the 28m-high Kabir Kouba Falls and a bike trail depicting animal totems for the eight clans of the Huron Wendat.

Mountain Kingdoms (01453 844400; mountainkingdoms.com) offers a 16-day trip to Utah and Arizona, where highlights include a native-led tour of Canyon de Chelly and a day and night in the Grand Canyon. The next departure is 1 May 2010, and the tour costs from 2,595, including flights, accommodation and most meals.

American Round Up (01798 865946; americanroundup.com) has a number of native-led tours in the Navajo Nation. A day tour including a visit to a Navajo family and a one-hour balloon flight costs 278. This can be added to a 14-night package that costs from 1,415, with flights, full-board accommodation and car hire.

America As You Like It (020 8742 8299; americaasyoulikeit.com) offers packages to Monument Valley with local guides leading tours that include restricted areas. A seven-night package, with flights, accommodation, some meals, one full-day tour and car hire, costs from 880.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/travel/2009/sep/27/native-american-holidays-arizona>